

‘Shaken not stirred’ – the twilight world of the 21st century James Bond...

Forget the personal trainer, the personal chef, the personal ‘fixer’ and even the Man Friday. Today’s ‘must have’ for ultra high-worth movers and shakers is the personal risk consultant – the 007 of the 21st century....

It is accepted that today’s very high flying executive is surrounded by a posse of people ready to pander to every need. From the personal trainers to the personal chefs, the diary secretary and a host of other fixers and assistants, supremacy in the corporate fast lane is only achievable when everyday needs, whims and fancies are taken care of by others.

But a new character has stepped into entourages surrounding the uber-rich – it’s the personal risk consultant and his presence is probably of greater value to the executive than all the others put together.

Risk: the word, defined in the dictionary, as ‘the possibility of suffering harm or loss, danger, hazard...’ making it an apt adjective to describe the very actions that this consultant employs on a day-to-day basis. Essentially, a personal strategic intelligence and risk management consultant’s job is to review every facet of a client’s personal and business life to ensure security is not compromised in any which way, nor his reputational risk endangered.

Sadly, as we progress further into the 21st century, companies and governments are becoming increasingly vulnerable. The ‘big brother is watching’ adage has never been more true – from our informal meetings with friends to our company emails, there are people in this world desperate to eavesdrop or hack into computer systems, even blackmail employees to get their hands on the tiniest snippet of information which could be of value to a third – or more – party.

And it is this information which is devoured and sold on – exposing individuals and companies to a myriad of possibilities, from the loss of a potential contract to the siphoning-off of funds. The information which is passed or sold-on, can endanger lives and damage the integrity of innocent people.

It is the risk consultant’s job to ensure that all data pertaining to a client is safeguarded. It is also his job to literally sweep a company’s systems or individual’s assets to ensure that there are no signs of information leakages which could fall into rival hands and it is his job to investigate and analyse all aspects of the company’s or a person’s dealings to understand the risks and rewards of an opportunity – and advise accordingly.

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In short, the risk consultant wears many hats – he is a management consultant, market researcher, financial analyst, private investigator, policeman and cyber crime expert all rolled in to one. And he's highly experienced in acting covertly. He's the 007 of the 21st century.

"The information we can provide for clients can relate to individuals, companies, countries and markets in which they plan to do business," explained Stuart Poole-Robb a strategic intelligence and risk management consultant with almost 40 years' investigative experience.

Poole-Robb formed his London headquartered company, KCS Group Europe Limited, some four years ago to provide clients with a discreetly operated service. His career in strategic intelligence began when he was attached to Special Forces during his Royal Air Force days – he served in a number of Middle East, African and Far Eastern countries. His experience from those military days and his subsequent work has made him one of the foremost specialists in the fields of international security, intelligence operations and threats.

"The pace of political, economic and social change in many countries where blue-chip corporations, individual investors or even government agencies do business, is accelerating at a phenomenal rate," Poole-Robb said.

"Consequently, it has become increasingly more important for a business to understand in-depth, the challenges and opportunities which are arising in either a new or existing territory. KCS can help to provide that clarity and an unparalleled range of services which entrepreneurs and organisations need for successful performance.

"We make it our business to find workable and effective solutions to seemingly impossible challenges," Poole-Robb explained, citing the fact that over the years he has built up a substantial number of contacts or 'assets' around the world who can be called upon to provide both local knowledge and intelligence gathering.

"A risk consultant can't just set up office and start operating without already having set up a wide network of tried and trusted contacts. As well as having offices in key global locations, KCS relies on a network of investigators to constantly feed-back intelligence on a wide range of topics and to provide insight into current activities, threats and risks on behalf of our clients," explained Poole-Robb.

"We're not suggesting that blue-chip companies and government agencies are negligent in their security procedures: indeed, both internally and externally, most organisations operate within a tight network of safeguarding tactics. We're not in the business to act as security guards – our job is to penetrate far below the surface to discover weak areas where important data and information could leak out to the detriment of an individual," explained Poole-Robb.

Indeed, it is strategic intelligence operators like KCS who will move discreetly behind the scenes and look for the weakest links. The most common malpractice is simple negligence.

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For example, confidential and important documents are left by mistake in a non-secure place: it takes a stranger, a cleaner, a chauffeur - even a person on staff with a grudge – just a few moments to mentally scan the content or photograph the pages and then find a 'market' to sell the intelligence on.

Negligence in the workplace can be a simple matter of forgetting to switch down a computer to having an important business conversation within earshot of potential spies. "On trains and planes people are compromised each time they take a phone call, switch on their laptops or even simply chat about the day's business with the person sitting next to them," explained Poole-Robb.

"There is no such thing as a safe environment these days and it is down to us as risk management and strategic intelligence consultants to plug those holes which exist, through a mix of training procedures for personnel and surveillance of the premises to tighten up procedures."

But what goes on behind the scenes in international espionage – why should individuals feel sufficiently threatened to employ the likes of KCS? The simple answer is that in this turbulent world there are people looking for the fast buck – and the more tempting that buck is, then the dirty tricks become even more devious and no one is safe.

"In all the years that I have been carrying out investigative procedures on behalf of clients, it never fails to amaze me that the human being is a very strange individual," said Poole-Robb. "People can be very serious in their intentions but when the proverbial carrot is dangled, sense and sensibility go out the window – along with the information of use to others."

In today's world, adds Poole-Robb, one of the most serious threats to the security and the profitability, even the survival of an organisation, is probably sitting on a desk in front of anyone from the CEO down – that is, the computer.

"One can set up all the security procedures under the sun to protect storage data, but these procedures are only as good as the people implementing them or indeed operating them. A computer hoards all the information that anyone seeking to make that quick buck needs and accessing the machine can be the simplest thing in the world. A carelessly protected laptop can open doors for thieves," Poole-Robb stressed.

"It's not just a case of ensuring that a laptop is not used in full view of anyone who might be wandering past or looking over a shoulder it's also a case of protecting against remote access, or in other words protecting against 'hacking'. Hacking is the bane of the 21st century and it is reaching epidemic proportions," he added.

To a large extent, cyber crime is emanating from places such as Russia, former Iron Curtain states and China. Hacking tools can be accessed via the internet – and computer 'geeks' are often in the pocket of organised cyber crime gangs and even governments. They access and pass on valuable information ranging from personal banking details to tender bid documents.

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Other portable devices come into the equation. Any businessman travelling abroad could take a lesson from a diplomat, who became embroiled in an embarrassing and highly compromising scene a few years ago while on a mission to China.

By befriending a beautiful young Chinese woman while on his government's business, his defences were down. He took the woman back to his hotel room to discover the following morning that not only had the young lady disappeared so too had his Blackberry phone. It could have contained some very important, confidential information but luckily, in this instance, it didn't. More seriously, it could have offered a way for telecoms experts to hack into his country's server and thus access all sorts of information crucial to his country's security.

The fact that the theft was instantly reported and immediate measures taken to prevent any security breach did not, of course, stop a very embarrassing situation for the advisor – but the outcome could have been so much worse, said Poole-Robb.

The compromising of that diplomat may sound like a scene straight from the proverbial James Bond movie – but sadly it's been commonplace throughout generations. Today, however, incidents such as this have become more common and it's not just individuals who are susceptible – companies and government organisations are being exposed by the negligence – albeit at times fleetingly – of senior executives and officials. "Many of the world's successful business entrepreneurs are usually at an age when they are vulnerable when travelling alone abroad. The welcoming advances of a pretty young lady can lead them on the road to ruination," said Poole Robb, adding: "It may sound like dull advice but people should keep away from clubs, for example, where they might be compromised."

Until recently, risk management and strategic intelligence specialists were called to sort out problems *after* they had happened: "Rather liking shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted," Poole-Robb mused. "It is imperative that consultants such as ourselves are brought in at the start, to ensure such lapses do not occur and, equally, for people never to adopt the 'it won't happen to me' attitude. It can happen and, unless preventative measures are taken, it will."

"Working in today's global marketplace is exposing individuals and organisations to a new generation of threats. Our role is to address difficult and complex situations affecting individuals and businesses in non-domestic markets and, where possible, we level the playing field to create transparency around business transactions," Poole-Robb said.

"Defence issues, business development matters, intelligence gathering – all are discreet matters for us and for which we use our high level network to ensure the safety, the security and the integrity of our clients," he added.

It is not sufficient for anyone to consider doing business in another country without first understanding how that country and its principals 'tick'. "As example, just because you enjoy eating Chinese food doesn't mean you're a specialist on doing business in China," quotes Poole-Robb.

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“Understanding a country’s business ethics and the mentality of its people is not acquired from reading a book or appreciating its cuisine – the knowledge is built up over a very long period of time but, naively, people enter into non-domestic business dealings and then lick their wounds when everything goes wrong. This is why it is essential to consult a risk management and strategic intelligence expert in the first instance,” Poole-Robb concludes.

But don’t expect people like Poole-Robb to jump out of helicopters over blazing infernos or sip those ‘shaken not stirred’ cocktails in public – they’re much more covert than that!

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